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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RABAT 000570

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [ECON](#) [EFIS](#) [EAGR](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: MOROCCO RIOTS: WHAT HAPPENED IN SIDI IFNI?

REF: A. RABAT 0158

[B](#). RABAT 0411

[C](#). RABAT 0416

[D](#). RABAT 0546

Classified By: DCM Robert P. Jackson for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#). (C) The heavy-handed police breakup of a blockade at the Sidi Ifni port on June 7, and consequent riot, yielded numerous casualties. In contrast to media reports, there were neither fatalities nor rapes, but a consensus of credible independent inquiries confirms there were numerous cases of police abuse and use of excessive force. The local tensions that gave rise to the blockade of the port by unemployed university graduates remain unresolved and could have broader implications. Parliament is sending an official commission of inquiry to the town to investigate.

[2](#). (C) The Government's decision to prosecute Al-Jazeera for wrongly reporting deaths, an escalation in its ongoing dispute with the network, is another setback for press freedom. The police overreaction could have been due to poor training, but may also have been partly intended to signal a low tolerance for street demonstrations over economic issues, especially price increases for food and fuel. In contrast to Polisario claims, there was no significant political Sahara angle, but there were complaints that government resources go disproportionately to the territory and bypass the town. Local Berber tribal politics may have also played a role. In any case, maintaining order in the face of unrest, while still adhering to human rights standards, will be a difficult but important balancing act for the GOM as it grapples with this and future incidents of unrest. End Summary.

An Unclear Chain of Events and Claims of Deaths

[3](#). (U) On June 7, in the southern town of Sidi Ifni, police broke up a protest by the Union of Unemployed College Graduates (UUCG) that had blockaded the local port since June [2](#). Initial reports from NGOs, which were picked up by Al Jazeera and other media outlets such as Agence France Press, Reuters and BBC claimed that up to a dozen demonstrators had been killed, women raped and scores of people had been arrested or were missing. The reports were based in part on a June 7 press conference in which the Moroccan Center for

Human Rights (CMDH) denounced "police brutality" and claimed that 10 to 12 people "might" have died. The Government of Morocco (GOM) immediately and forcefully denied the claims.

14. (U) In the days following the incident, both the press and civil society backed away from reports of deaths, with CMDH officials telling PolOff in a meeting that their initial information had been incorrect and based on information received as events were unfolding.⁸ They insisted, however, that police misconduct occurred, and pointed to footage of the unrest posted on YouTube. CMDH and other credible media and NGO sources reported that large numbers of protesters had taken to the hills to hide from authorities, where at least some remained a week after June 7. The Government stated that it had no choice but to break up the protest, which had prevented trucks from leaving the local port and led to the spoilage of 700 tons of sardines and a financial loss of MAD 6 million (USD 812,000). Smaller, follow-up demonstrations, accompanied by some violence, continue.

Multiple Inquiries) Similar Results

15. (C) After initial resistance, the GOM allowed multiple, independent inquiry teams to visit Sidi Ifni and ask questions unhindered. They included groups from the (Islamist) opposition Party of Justice and Development (PJD) and a variety of NGOs including the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH), and Moroccan Organization for Human Rights (OMDH). Without exception, they all found evidence of

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illegal breaking and entering by members of the security forces, theft of property from homeowners, many instances of excessive use of force and beatings, and a deliberate taunting and insulting of citizens) especially women. No inquiries validated reports of deaths. PJD leader Lahcen Daoudi told PolCouns that his party's delegation found no evidence of rapes, or deaths, but much misconduct. Most individuals reported missing eventually turned up in custody, although some were thought to be hiding in the country around Sidi Ifni. On June 17, the GOM released seven of eleven detained protest leaders.

16. (C) Subsequent public statements from two members of the PJD delegation, Abdullah Baha and Mustapha Ramid, known to be strong and vocal critics of the Government, stated that they had found no evidence to support the most extreme allegations. On June 19, Parliament formed a 12-person Commission of Inquiry charged with visiting Sidi Ifni and conducting an official investigation.

YouTube Tells a Tale

17. (U) A review of YouTube clips showed police officers moving into the zone of unrest with batons, rubber bullets and, in one instance, a sling shot. Some videos, shot from inside homes, showed police battering down doors and, apparently, the messy aftermath of searches and bruises from beatings. Videos also showed protesters throwing rocks and objects at security forces. The Government claimed that 48 people had been slightly injured, 28 officers and 20 protesters, while NGO sources put the number of protesters injured at 60. According to the Government, approximately 1,100 members of the security forces participated in the action.

Troubled Context

18. (C) Sidi Ifni, a former Spanish colony that reverted to Morocco in 1969, has one of the lowest poverty rates in

Morocco (3.95 percent) but suffers from a tremendous gap between its wealthy, maritime-based elite and an impoverished general population (Ref D). CMDH President Hosni Abdelmajid said that the Union of Unemployed College Graduates (Comment: A nationally active but not necessarily respected organization which is often seen as being made up of &lazy layabouts8. End Comment.) deliberately chose to blockade the port because it was both a symbol of inequity and a way to get authorities, attention for their demands; which include jobs, better health care, and training. The blockade was triggered when only eight out of 150 applicants for refuse service jobs in the port were hired. Abdelmajid said that Sidi Ifni sees little benefit from the ocean wealth that pours into the port and then out its gates to the rest of Morocco and the world.

¶9. (C) Lawyer and President of human rights NGO Adala (Justice) (and former MEPI grantee) Abdelaziz Nouyidi said that &entrenched interests8 deliberately goaded local authorities into a strong response out of a concern that such protests may spread. Nouyidi said that Morocco is facing significant economic and social pressure resulting from the recent increases in fuel and food prices and that the Government and economic power structure are concerned about keeping a lid on bubbling discontent. He said the Polisario played absolutely no role in instigating the Sidi Ifni events, complaining that the Government was trying to discredit a social protest by ascribing to it a false political motive. Nouyidi added that Sidi Ifni's proximity to Western Sahara makes the authorities doubly sensitive about upheavals there.

Sahrawi on Sahrawi Jealousy...

¶10. (C) During a June 18 meeting with PolOff, foreign diplomats agreed with Nouyidi that they saw no Polisario hand in recent events, although others had reports of some

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Polisario flags appearing during the demonstration. They did, however, believe that anger over the vast differences between subsidies and services for pro-Morocco Sahrawis living in nearby Western Sahara, a scant 200 kilometers away, and those in Morocco proper played a catalytic role. One diplomat told PolOff that she had heard, during an April personal visit to Sidi Ifni, complaints from residents about the unfairness of the two-tier system in which their family members, by virtue of living south of an imaginary line, received services and funds far in excess of what they and others in the rest of Morocco received. She described a painfully poor town in which large groups of women searched trash cans every morning for food scraps. Another key demand of the protesters was a better road connection to Guelmim and Laayoune. The diplomat believed that this actually grew out of a desire to take better advantage of smuggling networks (one of the few sources of steady income in the area) into and out of Algeria through Guelmim.

... And Tribal Tensions

¶11. (C) Sidi Ifni remained part of a Spanish colony until the 1960s. The CMDH's Abdelmajid explained that the local Berber tribe, Ait Baamran, had been one of the strongest advocates for integration with newly independent Morocco, but had since grown disillusioned as &Morocco passed Sidi Ifni by.8 He said that the local population believes that the country has been hijacked by a Fes-based Arab elite which cares little for its &country cousins.8 Abdelmajid said that local anger has grown in the past year as they have seen increased sardine hauls but little local spill-over of wealth. (Note: Sidi Ifni is one of the sites chosen for participation in the Millennium Challenge Account. End Note.)

Implications for Press Freedom

¶12. (C) In the short-run, the biggest press casualty of these events is Al-Jazeera, which "broke" the story with a report of a dozen deaths caused by police. On June 15, the GOM suspended beleaguered (Ref C) Al Jazeera Rabat Bureau Chief Hassan al-Rachid's accreditation and charged him and CMDH member Ibrahim Sebaa El Layl with conspiracy to spread false information under article 42 of the press code. Both men face up to one year in prison and/or a fine of up to MAD 100,000 (USD 13,000). In an interview with independent French-language daily &Le Soir,8 Younes M'jahed, Secretary General of the Moroccan press union condemned sanctions against Rachidi, noting that Al Jazeera had already been criticized in the local press, and had publicly retracted its initial story. &Le Soir8 also carried an interview with Communications Minister Khalid Naciri, who condemned Al Jazeera's reporting, asserting that the network was fully aware that its information about the deaths was false before it chose to report it. He said Al-Jazeera was most culpable because other organizations relied on the network for their stories. Al-Jazeera continues to broadcast conflicting reports on Sidi Ifni, and has responded to GOM requests for an apology in a highly defensive manner.

¶13. (C) Two other local journalists who attempted to cover the events were detained for several hours by security forces in Sidi Ifni, during which time they claim that they and their families were threatened with torture and sexual assault. The journalists were eventually released, apparently after intervention from Ministry of Interior headquarters, but not before their photography equipment had been smashed. The case of these two journalists was widely reported in the local independent press.

Royal Eyebrows Raised

¶14. (C) We understand that, after the events, King Mohammed VI summoned his security advisors (Interior Minister Benmoussa and some security agency heads) to see him in Paris (where he is on vacation) to explain what had happened. This may suggest that he was not pleased with the results of the Sidi

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Ifni action.

Comment

¶15. (C) Curiously, the protesters did not make price increases a part of their list of complaints (in surprising counterpoint to most recent protests and public concern here). It is unclear, however, if the strong police reaction to the events in Sidi Ifni was a deliberate attempt by the Government to send a signal to the country that rampant unrest which threatens economic stability will not be tolerated. Clearly, the Government felt forced to react when MAD 6 million worth of fish spoiled while trucks were trapped inside the gates by the blockade. Some observers believe that action could have been the result of influential investors and business owners putting pressure on the Government to resolve a local issue which, as a result of police behavior, inadvertently became a national cause celebre.

¶16. (C) Comment Continued: Sidi Ifni does raise questions of how the government will maintain its commitment to respect for human rights by police forces if violent unrest spreads. Moroccan (mis)treatment of the press both during and after the confrontations, as well as the role played by the

internet in shedding light on the events demonstrates the limits to press freedom in Morocco, as well as difficulties in controlling information using traditional authoritarian methods in the age of YouTube and cell phone cameras. End Comment.

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